

Preserving Forest Grove

Newsletter of the Historic Landmarks Board

Old Paint, or Shellac: Many Parts Are Edible!

by
Kevin Kamberg

When most of us think about the paints and varnishes in and on historic buildings we think in terms of colors. Different periods and styles have their own "appropriate" color schemes and that's about as far as we usually go. To the extent that we think about materials it's most often about the lead content and how to cope with the known health hazards associated with it. But there is some fascinating history surrounding the types of paints and varnishes used when these great old buildings and homes were constructed.

Varnishes have been around since at least the ancient Egyptians. And today, as it was back then, varnish forms the core ingredient of many paints too. Add some sort of coloring agent - usually a mineral such as lead oxide or black soot (more commonly known as "lamp black") - and the transparent varnish becomes an opaque paint.

All of the historic varnishes are based on some sort of natural resin. That remains largely the case today, although the wonders of modern chemistry have produced synthetic resins that are far superior to natural resins in many respects. An alcoholic spirit was used to dissolve the earliest and most widely used resins into an easily usable form. When the spirits dried what was left was a solid

protective or decorative film. Mastic, sandarac and shellac - which is still widely used today, albeit more by hobbyist woodworkers and craftsmen - all readily dissolve in alcohol into a usable varnish which could then be brushed onto whatever surface one wanted to beautify or protect.



Alchemical Laboratory c. 1600

However, shellac wasn't widely used until the early 19th century. With the notable exception of shellac, spirit varnishes fell out of favor and were replaced with oil varnishes. Shellac is also a notable exception in that it is derived from the excretions of an Asian beetle which feeds on

the sap of a specific type of tree rather than directly derived from the sap resins as is the case with the other spirit varnishes. (An interesting side bar: shellac is edible and it is used as a glazing agent on pills and candies. It is also used to replace the natural wax of the apple, which is removed during the cleaning process. This coating may not be considered as vegetarian as it may, and probably does, contain crushed insects.)

In the Middle Ages, a German monk and craftsman, Theophilus Presbyter, found he could dissolve amber (a fossil resin) in heated linseed oil. The result was a drying-oil varnish that produced a tough resilient finish that was

deemed superior to spirit-based varnishes in several key ways, most notably in toughness and moisture resistance. Later it was discovered that less ancient resin deposits known as copal could also be processed in similar fashion into a similar but somewhat inferior (and less expensive) varnish.

Even today amber and the less ancient copal, are used to make varnish. The plentiful amber deposits of the Baltics and Eastern Russia are a primary source of amber varnish. Only about 10 percent of the mined amber there is suitable for jewelry and the rest is turned into varnish using essentially the same technology that Theophilus Presbyter discovered.

Linseed oil is used by itself as a sort of varnish, as is tung oil and some other similar vegetable oils. But they offer almost no durability and are most commonly used today underneath some sort of more durable varnish or lacquer. And even there the commercial market mixes them with alkyd or something similar to speed up drying times and dry film properties.

Water-based paints were also widely used. But they were used more as a means to add color than as a protective coating. Distemper (an early form of whitewash, also used as a medium for artistic painting) and other whitewashes were and still are used for decorations and to color plaster.

So-called Milk Paint was a blend of lime, pigment and milk and was used for exterior applications. It has staged something of a revival over the last few years and can easily be purchased online. Indeed many of the historic varnishes and paints appear to be increasingly popular with hobbyists, craftsmen and artists and can be found for sale online.

As the industrialization of the American economy progressed it produced a seemingly insignificant product which vastly altered the paint and varnish choices of Americans - the paint can in the 1860s. The paint can allowed paints and varnishes to be mass produced in factories and it quickly became easier and cheaper to purchase canned paint or varnish at a store than to make it locally. Both oil-based and water-based paints were

mass produced and by 1875 factory-made paint became the norm. Along with factory-made paints came factory ground pigments which were finer and made for a better looking paint job. Ingredients and recipes for making paints and varnishes were also standardized, producing a more consistent product at cheaper

prices. And that democratized interior decorating as more and more of the less affluent could afford to have their own homes decorated not just with mere paint and varnish but also with faux painting such as the simulated oak treatment given to the pine floors of the A. T. Smith house here in Forest Grove. The attraction of such treatments were obvious. Far cheaper to paint a cheaper wood to look like a more expensive wood than to buy the expensive wood in the first place.



Forest Grove Street Names

by
George Cushing

So you think you live on Ash Street? Don't be so sure...

Every town has some kind of street-naming convention. Sometimes these conventions even make sense. Forest Grove's is one of these. Sometimes. Let's take a look at some of Forest Grove's street-naming systems over its 150-odd year history as a city.

First, some background. As we all know, in 1842 Reverend Harvey Clark arrived in what was then known as West Tualatin Plains. With the help of A. T. Smith, they started a small community. The community began

to grow. In 1849, the Oregon Territorial Legislature granted the charter for Tualatin Academy, which later became Pacific University.

At that time, Harvey Clark donated 200 acres of land and, later, an

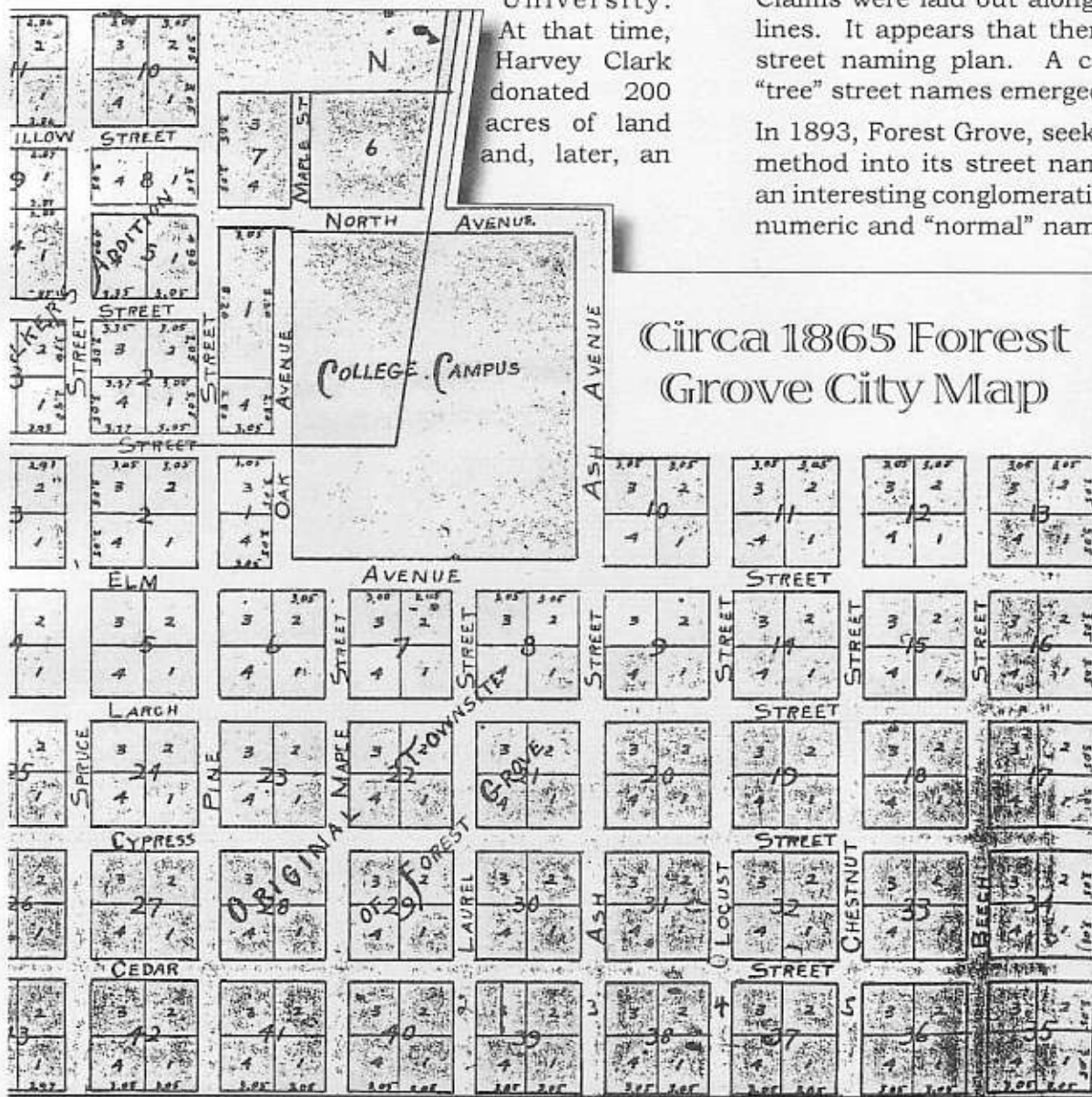
not named. But 1865 maps show streets that were laid out on an orderly North-South axis. This was because the original Donation Land Claims were laid out along North and South lines. It appears that there was no specific street naming plan. A confusing array of "tree" street names emerged.

In 1893, Forest Grove, seeking to insert some method into its street name madness, tried an interesting conglomeration of alphabetical, numeric and "normal" names: A, B, C and D

streets; Main, Council and College Streets; numbered streets going North and South and numbered streets labeled North and South going East and West. Presumably, the city wanted the advantages of Portland's orderly street naming system, but also wanted to maintain its small town feel.

On July 7, 1949, the Forest Grove News Times announced a newly proposed street renaming in Forest

Grove. It appears to have been formalized by the end of that year. The 1949 street names are the ones we currently enjoy: numerical numbered streets running East and West and alphabetical tree names running north and South on the East side of Main Street and alphabetical streets West of Main. This system works throughout the older areas of town. Newer subdivisions have followed less formal naming conventions, similar to the very first street naming efforts.



additional 150 acres to the city.

In January 1851, the growing community officially became Forest Grove. The land Clark had donated was primarily South and West of Tualatin Academy. The Clark Historic District was formed from that original 200-acre donation. Walker and Naylor were among other civic leaders who also donated land.

The land was divided into one-acre lots with streets. Prior to 1860, streets were generally

The Historic Landmarks Board is Looking for New Members

Is your volunteer spirit alive and well? Would you like to play a part (and have a say) in your city's government? Check us out on the web at:

<http://www.forestgrove-or.gov/city-government/historic-landmarks-board.html>

Then, contact James Reitz at 503-992-3233, or jreitz@forestgrove-or.gov. Thanks for your help!

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